

The Strike at Fort Leavenworth

BY

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THE strike of prisoners at the United States Disciplinary Barracks at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, week before last, was no ordinary prison mutiny. It presented many of the characteristics of a typical labor disturbance in the world outside. True, it originated in the vague unrest that occasionally seizes prison populations the world over, but it soon crystallized about well-defined demands and took form in definite organization. That it occurred in a military prison is one of the strangest things about this strange affair; yet, from the very nature of the demands that gave it force, it could not have occurred elsewhere. The 2,300 men who took part in it were still units in the military machine; with the exception of 400 conscientious objectors they had once been soldiers. They were subject to military discipline. Their officers were lieutenants, captains, majors and colonels. They stood at attention or saluted when these officers passed. An unquestioning obedience was expected of them that is not expected of men in civil prisons. Some of them, in the ordinary course of events, will be restored to military service. Yet they organized themselves in the approved labor union way and presented their demands just as if they had the full power of collective bargaining. In spite of walls separating one group from another, in spite of barred doors and double guards, they held mass meetings and discussed their grievances. In the mysterious fashion in which news travels through prison brick and stone, they informed each other of their thoughts and planned a course of action. They elected representatives to meet with their superior officers and voted on whether they would return to work. And they did this while one thousand armed soldiers of the 49th Infantry regiment waited outside the prison walls, ready to enter and shoot at command.

My own opportunities for observing this affair were unusual. For several days before the strike occurred I had gone among the prisoners at will, trying to learn exactly what sort of place the Disciplinary Barracks was. I bore a note of introduction to the commandant,

Col. Sedgwick Rice, from the third assistant secretary of war, and a pass from the commandant allowing me to go anywhere inside the prison at any time. I had talked to prisoners alone, had visited them at work and in their cells at night, had played checkers and sat at mess with them, and had made friends with them and the officers. I wanted a picture of the prison under normal conditions and although I succeeded in getting this before and after the strike, I got also a picture of one of the most dramatic events in penal history.

To understand the origin of so baffling a thing as a prison strike, one must know something of the events that led up to it and the conditions that produced it. Two years ago the Disciplinary Barracks at Fort Leavenworth was a place for confining officers and enlisted men of the army and Marine Corps who had been sentenced by courts-martial or other military tribunals. With the entrance of the United States into the war, a new kind of soldier appeared upon the horizon. In private life this new soldier had been a clerk, a mechanic, a day laborer, a politician, a business man. He knew nothing of military method, etiquette, procedure, discipline. He was a civilian transported to a new jurisdiction, a new *milieu*, and subjected to a new code of criminal ethics. He violated rules of conduct that he had had only a few weeks or months to understand, and the punishments for which he did not know.

Having violated these rules he was sent, if court-martialed and found guilty, to the Disciplinary Barracks. He came there with war-time sentences hanging over his head. He may have quitted his post for five minutes, he may have been absent without leave for a week, he may have intentionally deserted; his sentence was not likely to be less than five years and was very likely to be twenty-five. Hundreds of men now in the barracks, who never committed offenses or served penal terms in their lives before, now face fifteen, twenty, twenty-five and even thirty years of prison, which to many of them might as well be confinement for life.

Not only was a new kind of military offender produced, but this offender

The strike in the Military Prison at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, was probably one of the most significant events in military history. That Winthrop D. Lane was in the prison at the time with the knowledge of the War Department as the representative of the Survey and the National Civil Liberties Bureau was, to say the least, fortunate. The following account first appeared in the Survey for Feb. 15th, 1919, and is reprinted by the
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came to the barracks in such numbers that nobody knew what to do with him. On April 1, 1918, the population of the barracks was 1,508. By November it was 3,005—exactly double. Today it is 3,600. Men are doubled up in cells, 5 feet by 9, intended for single occupants, beds are placed in corridors that are meant to be empty, improvised buildings are used for sleeping quarters, a mess hall seating 1,400 has to be used in three shifts for every meal; every discomfort of overcrowding has to be borne as well as the human mind can bear it. All of this created an unprecedented atmosphere of tension, rebellion and protest.

From the point of view of administration, the situation was still further complicated by the sending to the barracks of a large number of conscientious objectors. These men obstinately refused for the most part to regard themselves as criminals, even in the military sense. For the first time in the history of the barracks, large numbers of men refused to work. This brought about increased use of the solitary cells and increased tension between the objectors and the guards. Individuals were beaten up for following what they believed to be the dictates of their conscience.¹

Thus, the morale of the whole prison was unsettled. Officers lost touch with the inmates. Life became hectic, uncertain and escaped control.

The armistice was signed November 11. At once prisoners began to ask what effect this would have on military offenders. Would clemency be shown to any of them? Would sentences be reduced? Individuals, through the influence of friends and the discovery of errors in courts-martial, began to be released. This demonstrated the power of organized appeal.

Then, on January 25, came the order for the release of 113 conscientious objectors. Nobody resented the release of these men. It is doubtful if any prisoner ever resented the discharge of a fellow inmate; he doubtless envied it. The attitude of the men confined at Fort Leavenworth was one of envy, and of resentment that so many of their fellows should go forth while they themselves remained. Their quarrel was with the authorities, not with the men released. These last became, in their eyes, additional centers of propaganda for their own release in the world outside.

Before the discharge of these objectors nothing had happened to reveal the full strength and nature of the men's sullenness. The embers of discontent were there; the officers felt them, the prisoners felt them. Only a spark was needed to set them off. That spark came on the afternoon of Saturday, January 25, when a Negro, who was playing cards with a white man in the yard, assaulted his opponent. Others mixed in the fray and although guards and officers quickly broke up the fight, two Negroes were taken to the hospital with injuries.

News of this affair spread quickly through the prison. There is no segregation of blacks from whites in the barracks and the number of blacks is, of course, greatly in the minority. For the first time in their lives many southerners in the prison had been compelled to live on equal terms with Negroes. Hot-heads among them gave leash to their race prejudice and northerners as well, strung to high tension by the conditions described, joined in the mêlées. Any activity that gave vent to passion seemed welcome. Men went mad, and in three days fifteen Negroes lay in the hospital, beaten or disabled. Every Negro in the prison feared for his life. The number of guards on duty was increased, and so far as possible Negroes went about under the protection of these guards. Nevertheless, in-

dividual attacks occurred and the hospital sheets do not reveal the full extent of injuries inflicted. The sight of a Negro going about with a bandaged arm or a swollen jaw or a patched head or even with fresh blood oozing from a new wound, was not uncommon.

How these race riots formed the opening of a strike that quickly showed no inherent connection with them will remain one of the mysteries of that week. A dozen or more white men who had taken part in the attacks were placed in solitary confinement, and this undoubtedly had the effect of adding to the discontent and of heightening the tension.

On Wednesday afternoon, January 29, the "first gang," composed of about 150 prisoners working outside the walls, quit on their jobs. They were excavating for a new building and they simply threw down their shovels and spent the afternoon talking, joking and loafing. The guards in charge made only a nominal effort to induce them to resume work.

This was the first overt act of the strike. In that mysterious fashion in which news travels through walls and barred doors in prison, the whole place was soon humming with the exciting news that the first gang had struck. What did it mean? What were they striking for? How far did they intend to go? What was to be their method—violence and an attempt to overpower the prison authorities, or the quiet method of simply refusing to work? Would they try to get others to join them?

One of the members of the "first gang" was a conscientious objector. In civilian life he had been a newspaper reporter and a poet; he was known as a "radical." That night he held a conference with friends in his wing. He told them that he had no desire to participate in a strike for such petty objects as the men of the first gang were then considering. No one had formulated that afternoon any statement of what was wanted. One prisoner wanted more tobacco; another wanted better food; another resented the treatment of Negroes on an equality with whites; a fourth felt bitter because he wasn't getting his letters from home; a fifth wanted the privilege of writing more letters himself. This absorption in small desires, and utter disagreement of one man with another, characterized the early stages of the strike. Everyone was discontented, many were surly, but only by chance did any two agree upon the causes of their dissatisfaction.

The prisoner in question told his friends that if he did not join the strike with the other members of his gang, his own safety might be endangered. Local Kansas City newspapers, notably the Star, had for a week past been publishing wholly untrue stories of the bitterness existing among the prisoners toward conscientious objectors. Realizing that these stories were not true, this prisoner nevertheless feared that their very publication (they were, of course, read by many prisoners) might produce the antagonism described. A single unfortunate accident might turn against the objectors the passions that had already been aroused against the blacks. If he, an objector, incurred the enmity of his fellows by refusing to join the strike, he might be the unwitting means of bringing about a general hostility toward the four hundred objectors still in prison. That night he went to his cell bed resolved to do what he could to make the strike a general demand for something more than extra tobacco and better food. Forty-eight hours later this man, H. Austin Simons, was the acknowledged spokesman of the strikers.

This was the night, also, of the fire in the quartermaster's warehouse. The flames were discovered at about six o'clock in the evening and soon bore every appearance of getting beyond control. From my perch on a window ledge in the adjutant's office, where my presence was barely tolerated (twice I

¹ It is not the purpose of this article to go into the truth of the charges of the physical mistreatment of prisoners. Most of the mistreatment that occurred was due to the unauthorized conduct of individual guards. That subject will be considered in a future article.

had to show my pass to be allowed to stay), I saw the whole panorama of the prison yard. Two conflicts were going on—the effort to control the fire and the effort to prevent trouble among the prisoners. These were securely locked in their cell wings two hundred yards from the fire, but six hundred men (the number in some of the wings) can make short work of locks if they go about it in the right way.

Soldiers from the 49th Infantry regiment, temporarily stationed at the post, had been called out to assist in the emergency. Squad after squad of ten men each ran into the prison yard and disappeared in the direction of the cell wings. One could only guess to what use it might be necessary to put them. Two guards, bearing a limp form, came from the direction of the quartermaster's warehouse and entered the hospital door. They were quickly followed by two more, and then by four carrying a stretcher with a body on it. In all, eleven men were taken into the hospital that evening, overcome by smoke or fatigue. Nine of these were prisoners, trusted inmates who had been allowed to help fight the flames.

Sparks flew over the hospital building and settled upon its roof. Heavy rolls of smoke poured through its screened porches and doors. One sighed with relief as he noted that it was built of stone, but quickly became alarmed at the recollection that its annex, containing many patients, was of wood.

An officer came running. "I want ten men quick," he yelled, "men who know how to handle guns." The description seemed superfluous, and the men were off in an instant.

As an organic part of the strike, the fire had no significance. In two hours it was practically extinguished, without loss of life but with the loss of approximately \$100,000 worth of clothing and supplies. Its occurrence, however, due as it was to the work of two or three prisoners who later confessed, was evidence of the spirit of unrest. Men were bent upon any measures that gave an outlet to their passions. The strain of it must have been very great on the 2,500 men locked in their cells. The fire screwed the tension to a higher pitch, and left both officers and prisoners with raw nerves.

Next morning occurred the first blunder of the administration. Without consulting Colonel Rice, the executive officer ordered that the prisoners be marched back to their wings immediately after breakfast and that they remain there for the morning. This did two things: it told the men that the officials were afraid that something might happen if they went to work, and it gave them further opportunity for agitation.

During all of this time my own relations with the men had been friendly and cordial. It was known to them that I was on good terms with the officers and the commandant. This fact, and the circumstance that some of the prisoners were sure to regard me with suspicion if I went too freely back and forth from office to cell while such momentous events were on foot, induced me to hold myself somewhat aloof during the next two days. I still went freely about the yard and talked with individual prisoners, but I stayed away from the cell wings, where the men were discussing their plans. It was easy enough to keep in touch with the main current of events and I had no wish to be an interloper.

At ten o'clock Thursday morning, Colonel Rice said to me: "This I. W. W. trouble that we have been fearing has started with some of the men. I am going down to see about it. Will you come with me?" I accompanied him and several officers to the boiler room where about thirty prisoners were gathered together, talking to a lieutenant from the executive office. Colonel Rice pushed to the center and faced the men. He is a large man whose military bearing is none the less impressive for being free and easy. To me, who have never been a prisoner under him, his face is generous and kindly. His man-

ner is not pompous, not domineering. He asked what the trouble was. In reply the spokesman said that the prisoners gathered there were not striking. They had no desire to strike. All they wanted was protection in keeping the boiler plant going. That morning, he said, the men had been called sneaks and scabs by other prisoners and had been threatened with violence if they did not stop working. This naturally frightened them and they had joined in a request for protection. Colonel Rice told them that measures were being taken for their safety and left them with a strong plea that they continue to perform their duties.

From there he went to the sixth wing, where it was understood that several hundred prisoners were especially vocal in stating their grievances. This wing, like all the others, has eight tiers of cells. Its occupants gathered about the colonel on the main floor and hung to the railings of the lower tiers. Colonel Rice thus faced an audience that packed in close around him and rose half way to the ceiling.

"I want to talk with the men here who think they have grievances," he said. There was no response.

"What, nobody here thinks he has a grievance?"

Two or three shouted "I have," or put up their hands and started forward. Colonel Rice offered to talk to them one at a time.

A man stepped forward and complained that he and several others had been transferred from an open cell to a closed cell without justification. Colonel Rice asked the executive officer to take the man's number and to report to him the reason for the man's transfer.

"Now, where's the man who said the food was bad?" he asked.

A ruddy-cheeked fellow of medium height, lithe frame and clear eyes stepped forward, receiving a round of applause from some of the prisoners. He placed himself in front of Colonel Rice, folded his arms and said:

"The food, sir, in this place is rotten."

"What's rotten about it?" asked the colonel.

"Why, it's rotten. It ain't fit to eat. A man can't work on it. A man can't keep himself fit on it. He becomes a wreck, sir."

"Is the bread rotten?"

"No, sir, the bread is the only thing that's good."

"Is the meat rotten?"

"Yes, sir, the meat is no good whatever. A man can't eat it."

"How do you know he can't?"

"Because I can't, sir."

"You know, don't you, that the meat you get is the same meat that soldiers eat? You know, don't you, we buy our meat from the government, that the government is allowed to buy only the best parts of the beef, and that the meat that comes into this institution is government inspected? You are eating the same meat that the soldiers all over this country are eating."

"How about those stinking old sausages?" shouted a prisoner from the upper tier, to the great amusement of the others.

"What are you here for?" asked the colonel, ignoring this remark.

"Disobedience, sir."

"You're a conscientious objector, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you an I. W. W.?"

"No, sir, I never belonged to that organization."

"You're a Socialist, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir, I'm a Socialist."

"And in addition to being a conscientious objector, you're a constitutional objector, aren't you?"

"I don't know as I know exactly what you mean, sir."

"I mean you object to all forms of government and order."

"No, sir, I do not."

"Well, most Socialists do."

"I beg your pardon," shouted a prisoner from an upper tier, but said no more.

"Now, men," began Colonel Rice, "I'm not down here to threaten you. That's not my purpose at all. I would really like to get your point of view. I would like to know what you think you're going to gain by your present conduct. I know many of you have grievances. Some of these grievances are real, and some are imaginary. I know what some of them are. I know there are men in here who can't understand why they have such long sentences. I know there are men here who can't understand why they have fifteen-, twenty-, twenty-five-year and even longer sentences, when other men who, in their judgment have committed similar offenses or no less serious offenses, have only two years."

The colonel had struck home. A mighty shout and hand-clapping greeted this statement. The colonel went on:

"But what I can't understand is why you think you are in a position to correct it. For aught you know, there may be others who are now trying to correct it. For aught you

there are only a few guards, and that you can take things into your own hands. It is true that there are only a few guards, but what you forget is that there are 4,000 soldiers in this post, a soldier for every man, and I can have 'em all here in five minutes." (General shifting of feet and sidelong glances.)

"Now, I know there are things about this institution that



W. Oral James, who first formulated the purposes of the strike



Carl Haessler, instructor in philosophy at the University of Illinois, a graduate of the University of Wisconsin and a Rhodes scholar. A member of the committee which met the commandant and known at the prison as the Lenine of Fort Leavenworth

could be better. And we are working all the time to make them better. I know the service in the dining-room is not all that I would like to have it. But there is exactly twice the number of prisoners in this institution that we can reasonably accommodate, and that is a condition that I cannot control. I didn't send you here. Don't imagine that I want to keep you. I'd like to get rid of the whole lot of you. You're no comfort to me."

Such was the groping, during the early stages of the strike, both by prisoners and officers, to find out what this spontaneous, inexplicable movement meant and how to quell it. No one knew yet just what was happening or would happen. No one knew how far the movement would go.

Colonel Rice was a study during these first days. For four years he had been in charge of the Disciplinary Barracks and



James O'Neil of Pittsburgh, a member of the prisoners' committee

know, there may be people who are now trying to get clemency for you. I am not making any promises, but these people may be working hard and may have some chance of success. But what are you doing? You are making it so much harder for them by your present conduct. You are fixing it so that even when the time comes when something might be done for you, those who are making the effort will find their hands tied.

"I am perhaps in closer touch with what is going on here than you think. I have many sources of information and I hear much. If I had no other source than the anonymous letters from prisoners that come to my desk, I would know, for example, that you are saying that you are 3,600 strong, that



11. Austin Simons, star reporter of the Chicago Examiner and a conscientious objector; the spokesman of the committee that met the commandant

This and the pictures opposite are from pencil drawings by Maurice Becker, of New York, a conscientious objector, who was discharged last week from Fort Leavenworth after serving four months of a twenty-five-year sentence

had never before seen the men under him in such a mood as this. He knew as much, and as little, about the causes of the unrest as any one else knew. He seemed honestly seeking for the explanation, and while he disapproved the conduct of the men and found it difficult to talk to them in their present temper, he made himself do it. He bore at times the attitude of a patient, overtried father toward his children. In his reference to the force at his command, one felt that he was making this threat more from a sense of duty and in the hope that it would have the desired effect, than because he gloried in his opportunity to use it. Yet every man there knew that he could use it, and that his military traditions and training undoubtedly prompted him to that solution.

One felt another thing: If only Colonel Rice would really take these men into his confidence! I knew that a month before he had made recommendations to the War Department that would, if approved, go far to remove the causes of this present disturbance. He had hinted at these in his remarks to the men in the sixth wing. But he could not bring himself to make the full confession—to prisoners.

That noon the men were lined up in the yard as usual, to be marched out to work. This was to be the final test. Would the prisoners acknowledge their obligations, or

would—one shuddered as he filled in the alternative, with the infantrymen waiting outside.

An officer called out the gangs. "First gang," he shouted, and waited for it to form in line. No one stirred.

"There ain't no first gang," came a voice from the ranks.

"Second gang," shouted the officer.

"There ain't no second gang," came another voice.

"To hell with work. We want to go home," shouted a prisoner.

"Third gang," called the officer.

"There ain't no third gang," came from another quarter. The officer folded his sheet and turning to Colonel Rice remarked that the prisoners of the United States Disciplinary Barracks seemed to be on strike.

Colonel Rice stepped forward. He raised his voice and asked the men to tell him why they refused to work. Again he pleaded for individuals to come out and tell him what was the trouble. "I want your point of view," he said. "No one will be punished for coming out and speaking to me here. I know you have leaders and I want those leaders to come forth and speak to me, man to man."

No one moved. Two thousand prisoners stood with their arms folded, motionless except for the occasional shouting of

individuals. In their ill-fitting coats and shapeless trousers with white numbers two and a half inches high sewed above each knee and across their backs, they looked like what in the eyes of the law they were—a herd of branded criminals. Yet among them were many men of character and attainments, many ignorant youths who had got into trouble through sheer carelessness, many men who had committed offenses for which any civil court would punish them. What could such a conglomerate group have in common?

"We want to go home," shouted some. "We want better food," shouted others. One man brought a laugh by bawling at the top of his lungs, "Give us liberty or give us death."

Colonel Rice walked up and down, now addressing several sentences at a time to the men, now begging individuals to come forth. Yet no one wanted to reveal himself as a leader in the presence of half a dozen prison officers. Few smiled, for though they were suddenly realizing the proportions of their own mass movement, they did not know how to control it or give it direction.

Suddenly the ranks opened and a small prisoner with closely shaven head and wearing a long ugly raincoat pushed forward. With his intent expression he had somewhat the appearance of a Franciscan monk. I had seen him at the Atlantic branch of the Disciplinary Barracks at Fort Jay and knew him to be the close friend and legal ward of a man long prominent in social work. An officer called, "Here is a speaker, sir." There was a quick hush. Beginning in a low voice, the prisoner said:

Sir, I have been here only a few days. I was transferred four days ago from the Disciplinary Barracks at Fort Jay. I am in no sense a leader of these men. I can speak for myself, however, and [here he raised his voice so that he could be heard throughout the yard] I think I speak for many others in these silent ranks, when I say that our object in thus seeming to oppose authority is that this is the only way in which we can make articulate our demand to know what is to become of us. What, sir, is the government going to do with us?

I am a conscientious objector. I realize that in thus separating myself from this mass I make myself a marked man among your officers. I am willing to do this, sir, if I can enlighten you, and through you others, in regard to the meaning of this protest. My own sentence happens to be twenty years, but my case is only one. There are hundreds of men in this prison bearing sentences of fifteen, twenty and twenty-five years (I am not now speaking of objectors only) who were new to military method and requirements, and who committed offenses for which the peace-time judgments would be only a few months or at most two or three years. Are these men to remain here for the rest of their lives?

Sir, the armistice was signed nearly three months ago. The war is over. The government has already released 113 of our fellows. Has it not had time to investigate the justice of other claims? You ask, sir, what are our grievances. I answer that this is our grievance. These men, as I read them, intend no violence. You see them here with their arms folded, refusing to work. That is the method of their protest. We ask, and we ask of you because you are the one immediately in authority over us, what is our future? In the remarks you have just made you have cleared the air more than in your talks yesterday in the wings. At least we may now guess where you stand. But we recognize that your authority is limited. And we wish our protest and our inquiry to be carried over these walls and to reach the seat of authority in Washington. We ask this question and we adopt this method because we are prisoners and because this is the only method known to us.

The prisoner, W. Oral James, stepped back into his place. It was evident that his remarks had made a deep impression upon one part of his audience at least—his fellow prisoners. Colonel Rice spoke briefly in reply and when he had finished his officers again walked up and down the ranks inviting those who were willing to work to fall out. A hundred did so. The rest stood as before, with arms folded. There were smiles on their faces now. One felt that indecision had vanished and that at last they knew what they were striking for.

The men were marched back to their wings. What was to be done? The number of strikers was about 2,300. They were still part of the military forces of the country. They were subject to military discipline. Their officers were military men. Their conduct was mutiny, and for mutiny there is only one recourse.

That afternoon Colonel Rice telephoned to Major-General Leonard Wood in Chicago for permission to use the soldiers of the 49th Infantry regiment, if he should need them. General Wood issued permission for the use of the troops "to maintain discipline, to protect prisoners and to protect government property." Authority could not be broader. That night when I left the prison to go to supper, I passed the khaki and steel of a thousand soldiers waiting outside the prison gate.

Meanwhile the men had profited by the scene in the yard that noon. The rest of Thursday was the period of actual organization. It was literally true that while the soldiers were being sent for and were marching toward the gate, the strike was gathering the force—and the direction—that carried it through to victory. Organization was first perfected in the seventh wing. A committee was elected and a statement of demands drawn up. The prisoners in this wing sent messages to those in other wings, telling them what the demands were and urging them to elect their own committees, with one prisoner to serve on a general committee that would attempt to confer with the officials. "We urge you to preserve order, to stand firm and commit no violence," concluded the message sent to these wings.

The next morning no attempt was made to take the men out to work. Using my pass I visited the men in the seventh wing. They received me as every body of men who think themselves unjustly treated receive a reporter—with open arms. To them I was a bridge to the outside world. One prisoner suggested that I might be a government spy, but he was quickly silenced by those who thought they knew better. After all, they went largely on faith, for only one man in all those hundreds had known me personally before I had arrived a week earlier.

The men were just about to hold a meeting—the "soviet of the seventh wing," they were humorously calling themselves. Simons mounted a box and I leaned over the rail of the first balcony so that I could see the faces both above and below. Simons was persuasive, eloquent, direct. His periods were rounded, his sentences complete, his climaxes effective. He told them that the strike had been organized in the other wings, each wing having elected a committee just as the seventh had done. He read the demands that had been formulated the night before: 1, that the commandant recommend to the War Department the immediate release of all military prisoners; 2, immunity from punishment for all men who had led in the strike movement; 3, recognition of a permanent grievance committee of prisoners.

He told them that theirs was the just cause of self-government now being fought for throughout the civilized world. He brought prolonged applause by his dramatic announcement that the disciplinary battalion (the group of men about to be restored to the service), had joined the strike, and though this news later proved to be untrue, the reception accorded it showed how eagerly the men welcomed additions to their ranks. He declared that no authority could withstand the power of a united body of men. Efforts, he said, would be made to separate them.

"When the officials come to take you out of your wings," he shouted, "use no violence. Whether they take you out together, in groups, or singly, go quietly into the yard. Once there, refuse to work. Violence accomplishes nothing. Solidarity accomplishes all things. The watchword of the workingman throughout the world today is solidarity. Say nothing, do nothing, but stand like this." The speaker folded his arms. "A man who commits no overt act, but stands like this is immovable."

As he spoke, I thought of the thousand soldiers outside. I thought of the thick walls that shut these men in, and of the barred doors between them and their fellows. I wondered

what was the mysterious power by which the speaker and his listeners thought they could control their own destinies. There seemed a grim and tragic humor in the situation of these upturned faces, eagerly drinking in the words of their interpreter. I wondered if either he or they fully sensed the dire possibilities that seemed so imminent to me.

I returned to the prison offices with this question in my mind. There I learned that Colonel Rice, after a sleepless night, had made up his mind. He called me into his office and asked me to sit down; I could see at once that his struggle had been intense. He went quickly to the heart of his decision. He had enough force at his command, he said, to compel obedience from every prisoner. "No one knows better than I," he declared, "what this might mean. It might mean violence and it might mean bloodshed. If these men were merely mutinous, I should not hesitate. But this is no ordinary prison uprising. These men have some justification, much justification, for their feeling of discontent. I know the approved military method of handling this situation; but I know, too, that we are in a changed world today. The American people do not stand for the use of military force if there is a better way. I propose to find that better way. I shall listen to a committee of prisoners. If this is surrender, let them make the most of it."

I felt that he had reached a momentous decision. A moment later I realized just how courageous his decision was. An officer of Colonel Rice's staff stopped me and said:

"Do you know how to settle this mutiny?"

"No," I answered.

"Well, I do," he snapped. "I could settle it in seventy-two hours. I'd lock every prisoner in his cell and I'd starve him, that's what I'd do. In three days every one of 'em would be crawling to me on their bellies, begging to be allowed to work. A week'd see them. I'm plumb disgusted with this pusillanimous way of handling a bunch of criminals."

The committee met with the commandant and several other officers at 2:30 that afternoon. When the seventeen prisoners marched into the room, Colonel Rice asked them if they had a spokesman. Simons stepped forward. He said:

Sir, on behalf of the general prisoners confined in this barracks, I am authorized to present to you the following statement of demands which I shall read:

"We, the men now confined in the U. S. D. B., Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, having been convicted by courts-martial, present the following as essential for the restoration of normal conditions:

"1. That the commandant immediately release from solitary confinement all men now there for having participated in this movement from its beginning, and that he promise that no man involved in this movement shall be punished or discriminated against in the future for his part in it.

"2. That the following telegram be sent to the secretary of war at once: 'General prisoners confined in the U. S. D. B., Fort Leavenworth, petition, with approval of commandant, for amnesty to all convicted by courts-martial. Senators Chamberlain and Borah, American Bar Association and public opinion generally declare sentences unjust and amnesty the proper redress. Our release is just as urgent as that of the 113 conscientious objectors recently discharged. Democratic military justice requires amnesty. (Signed) Prisoners' General Committee elected at request of officers.'

"3. That the commandant recognize a permanent grievance committee to be elected by the men; and that this committee shall have the right to discuss with the authorities such improvements of conditions as seem in the committee's judgment to be desirable."

Colonel Rice took up the points one by one. The first, in spite of its somewhat vague phraseology, was well known to refer particularly to white prisoners who had been placed in solitary confinement for participating in the race riots. Colonel Rice told the committee that eleven of the men so confined had already been released and that the cases of the other three were at that moment being investigated by the executive officer. A new man held this position, "Square Deal" Smith, so-called from his record of fairness in the navy. After some parleying, the committee decided to present those facts to the men and to seek their judgment.

It was now Colonel Rice's turn to explode a bombshell. At last he took the men into his confidence. He read a paragraph from a letter that he had sent to the War Department a month previously on the question of excessive wartime sentences. In effect his recommendation was that all such sentences be reduced to a peace-time basis. This would cut many 15, 20 and 25-year sentences to a few months, or at most to a year or two. It was evident that the members of the committee were greatly surprised at this revelation of the commandant's action. They stood out, however, for the sending of the telegram. Colonel Rice offered instead to deliver the message in person, and explained that he was making an official trip to Washington in two days. To this the committee finally agreed. It agreed also to omit the words, "with approval of commandant," since by taking the message in person Colonel Rice gave evidence of his approval.

The third point caused no difficulty whatever, for Colonel Rice immediately said that he would be entirely willing to discuss matters with a general prisoners' committee, so long as such a committee displayed a proper sense of leadership and remained representative of the men.

The men returned to their wings. They were given an hour—all they asked for—in which to report the decision of the other prisoners.

Rumors quickly came back that the committee was meeting with difficulty in some of the wings. The fourth wing, especially, we heard, was insisting that the message to the Secretary of War be sent at once by wire. The reason was not far to seek. The strike could then be continued until an answer had been received!

At last the committee returned, four hours after its appointment. A new spokesman stepped to the front.

"Sir, I am spokesman this evening, general prisoner 17,380, who acted as spokesman this afternoon being somewhat tired."

Thus spoke Carl Haessler, graduate of the University of Wisconsin, Rhodes scholar at Oxford, editorial writer, Socialist, conscientious objector. He continued:

"Sir, I have to report that the general prisoners confined in this barracks have voted unanimously—unanimously, sir—to return to work tomorrow morning and to restore a normal state of affairs upon the conditions agreed upon this afternoon."

A breath could have been heard. Colonel Rice's eyes softened, his face became suffused with emotion, and he said almost in a whisper, "That is very, very gratifying."

The strike was over. The democratic, non-military method had won. And the members of the 49th Infantry, who had been cooling their heels outside the gates for two days, were sent packing.

Next morning all the prisoners returned to work. When the men lined up after breakfast, the change in their attitude was evident. Usually there is much scuffling, moving about and violation of the rule against talking in ranks. That morning every man was alert with a new dignity. The officers and guards marked it and commented upon it later.

How long will it last? The result of Colonel Rice's visit to Washington could not be learned when this account went to press. There was talk that the men would strike again if no hope was held out to them. The committee of prisoners was doing all in its power to hold the men to their word to preserve order and to commit no violence.

What does it all mean? For one thing it means increasing articulateness for one of the last great inarticulate groups—the convicted lawbreaker. For another, it means the establishment, for once at least, of a new order of military comity. Whether it will also mean "democratic military justice" for hundreds of men who have been unjustly sentenced to excessive terms of confinement remains to be seen.